

## Civil War Book Review

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Summer 2004

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### Almost To Freedom

George McNamara

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## Review

McNamara, George

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**Nelson, Vaunda Micheaux** *Almost To Freedom*. Carolrhoda Books, Inc., \$16.95  
ISBN 157505342X

Child's play

A unique perspective on American slavery

Historical momentum is best served when the interests touched include everyone especially the children. Vaunda Micheaux Nelson touches the young reader or listener with a story related to a very special subject. The illustrations by Colin Bootman bring a visual presence that make the eyes linger long after the words are read or heard.

**Almost To Freedom** is a very human story about slavery. Human, yet narrated through the eyes of a rag doll initially named Sally. Sally, through innocent language, gives the reader unique witness to the horrors and fears of her owner Lindy, Lindy's momma Miz Rachel and her papa, Mr. Henry. After all, Sally makes it clear on the second page of the book: Bein' Lindy's doll baby is a right important job. The purity of language in no way softens the experiences of this family. In very few pages the message is clear. A child born into a slave family does not understand the predicament but learns all to well both personally and through stark observation.

The effective combination of words and pictures makes even the adult reader feel the scourge of the master's whip; the warmth of the sun high above the laborer's toil; the fear of the unknown; the generosity of strangers and a very special love of family.

A child who is fortunate to have **Almost To Freedom** on the bookshelf will easily be fascinated and made inquisitive. Some words and expressions need clarification—a challenge made properly easy by the author's inclusion of a final page dedicated to definitions of words and phrases.

Vaunda Micheaux Nelson was inspired to write this book as a result of viewing a display of black rag-dolls at the Museum of International Folk Art in Santa Fe, New Mexico. The child who is exposed to the story will also be inspired to identify not only with the doll who conducts the journey through the pages but everyone else whose importance is made very clear by the narrator's words.

Circumstances require that the doll be given a new name at the end of the story. The reader will know, or be taught, that the change is not a tragedy. It is a sign of hope. Hope that more and more children who, through no fault of their own or family were slaves, will and do achieve freedom through adult and juvenile courage. My only regret is that the book suddenly ends. But, I am an adult. The child readers will extend the story in their minds and hopefully be encouraged to delve into the subject as maturity dictates.

**Almost To Freedom** is, as stated on the jacket, written for ages 6—10. I urge parents, teachers and librarians to recognize this work and make sure it is available and highlighted. Adults should not be strangers to its pages. The child reader will initiate a conversation. Hopefully that dialogue will be part of an environment that encourages the love and appreciation of our history. Those of us, who, as adults, include history as a major interest, will be grateful to know that **Almost To Freedom** will instigate the followers needed to fill studious ranks.

*George McNamara is involved in the work to rehabilitate the name and reputation of Doctor Samuel A. Mudd. He lectures and has written numerous articles on the subject. His writing has also included subjects, for children, related to the era of our Civil War.*